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### Poetics, Inspiration, and Gender in 1721

What better way to comment on the beguiling mystery of poetic inspiration than to couch this message in a poetic masterpiece? Dickinson's "He was my host – he was my guest" is not lengthy; it consists of two quatrains. The iambic short meter remains solidly unbroken. Even the punctuation—the several commas, the periods, and the unusually singular dash—is fairly standard (although one may attribute this regularity to Mabel Loomis Todd's transcription of this poem whose manuscript is lost). However, the poem is aurally exquisite.

The incremental repetition in the first line, "He was my host – he was my guest," foreshadows the unity of the entire poem. At the end of the stanza, the repetition of "invited" occurs within inverted phrases, "I invited him" versus "he invited me," for a repetitively layered effect. Both the word "invited" and the larger, inclusive invitation itself are repeated, but the context changes slightly. The second stanza also begins with incremental repetition; the "So infinite" of line five becomes "So intimate" in line six. By using incremental repetition, Dickinson stresses each difference while maintaining a seamless flow of ideas. For instance, "he was my guest" makes the reader pause. The speaker just stated, "He was my host," so how can both statements apply? The end of the stanza answers the question that this slight alteration prompts. Furthermore, the aural connection between "So intimate" and "So infinite" forces the reader to consider what "infinite" and "intimate" mean and how they relate to each other. If one

reads the words together, the speaker's relationship to the subject becomes so close that their identities merge, a concept that the speaker's confusion in stanza one supports.

The poem's repetition extends from words to sounds. Its *abcb* rhyme scheme contains one slant rhyme, "day" / "me," and one exact rhyme, "indeed" / "seed." However, Dickinson includes two internal slant rhymes in "guest" / "host" and "infinite" / "intimate." In fact, the latter pair of words occurs in a masterful sequence: "So infinite our intercourse / So intimate, indeed." Combined, rhythm and sound link "*infinite*," "*intercourse*," and "*intimate*" with "*indeed*," providing rhythmic closure. In addition, the "ee" of "*indeed*," "*seemed*," "*keeper*," and "*seed*" repeats both visually and aurally. Meanwhile, line seven continues the "i" sound in "*Analysis*" and adds the "a" of "*Analysis*," "*as*," and "*capsule*" as well as the "s" of "*Analysis*," "*capsule*," and "*seemed*." Although Todd chose both alternatives for publication, "*interview*" for "*intercourse*" and "*like*" for "*as*," the original transcription selections lend phonemic continuity.

The perfection of the poem's auditory construction is particularly pertinent in conjunction with the poem's literal content. While one certainly may read the poem's subject, "He," as an actual man, "He" also may refer to the source of poetry, the poetic muse, or even poetry itself. The speaker cannot discern if he beckoned her or if she called to him, if poetry deemed her a worthy companion or if she sought it out, initiating their relationship. Her puzzlement mirrors the inverted syntax of line three. One expects "I never to this day / Could tell if I invited him, / Or he invited me"; however, the lines actually are "I never to this day / If I invited him could tell, / Or he invited me." While the reader comprehends the meaning, the unusual structure adds to the merging identities of the speaker and the subject. Moreover, a focal shift occurs in these ending two lines. While the first line of the stanza focuses solely on "he" and the second line

focuses solely on the speaker, the chiasmus of lines three and four further conflates and confuses their identities.

The second stanza poses a hermeneutical challenge. In general, analysis is to reduce something to its “fundamental elements” (OED). In logic, it can mean “the tracing of things to their source, and the resolution of knowledge into its original principles”; and, more recently, in philosophy, it is, interestingly, “the procedure or the result of finding an expression exactly equivalent to a given word, phrase, or sentence, for the purpose of clarification” (OED). A capsule, on the other hand, is not only a small “case or receptacle,” but it is also a “seed-vessel...[that] open[s] when ripe by separation of its valves” (OED). As a verb, capsule also means “to furnish or close with a capsule” (OED).

Therefore, the “capsule” could be the protective container for the seed that “opens when ripe,” the keeper of the seed itself, or the action of capping the seed. If the “seed” is “capsuled,” then “analysis” is the tidy closure of “intimate” correspondence. If the “capsule” is the keeper itself, then “analysis” is the natural byproduct of the personal “intercourse.” If the “capsule” is a protective container, is it necessary or unnecessary? “Analysis” seems a cold, distanced word to use in the context of an “intimate” relationship. The most likely reading, if a “keeper” guards the “seed,” then the “capsule” is unnecessary just as “analysis,” perhaps with the philosophical meaning of exactness, is unnecessary in such a close association. The poet does not analyze the gift or its source; instead, she accepts it and communes with it in a relationship that bypasses the intellect and exact “clarification.”

The last notable aspect of the poem is the personification of poetic inspiration. By making the source of poetry male, Dickinson conflates the intimacy of such inspiration with physical and spiritual intimacy between two people. The masculine gender also connotes the

power of the publishing world. Most writers of repute, editors, and publishers were male. However, Dickinson subverts this authority with the ambivalence of the first stanza. Who actually has the power, the subject or the speaker? The speaker cannot determine—just as the publishing world held publishing power over Dickinson, but she held power over her own work.

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